

# Evaluation Partner for the Future Ready Fund: Social and Emotional Skills

## **Final Report Executive Summary**

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# Executive summary

## Overview

The Nesta Future Ready Fund (FRF) is a £500,000 fund designed to support organisations in developing high-potential, early-stage interventions that tap into and promote the social and emotional skills of young people aged 11 to 18. It builds on a growing recognition of the changing demand for skills in employment over the coming years, and in particular the perceived importance of so-called ‘non-cognitive’ skills for success in the 21st century. Indeed, recent reports suggest that a range of social and emotional skills are associated not only with academic performance, but also with much later financial stability and involvement in crime.

During 2019 and 2020, ten organisations have been supported by the FRF to deliver specific interventions designed to build young people’s social and emotional skills. These cover a diverse range of approaches, from targeted work with vulnerable young people through to whole-school interventions designed to promote social and emotional skills across large student cohorts. The University of Sussex (UoS) team was contracted as the evaluation partner of the FRF, working with all ten grantees. Our role as evaluation partner was to establish and implement an overarching framework for collectively exploring, questioning, and describing the nature, goals, methods, and impacts of the interventions. The evaluation approach was framed with attention to the Education Endowment Foundation’s SPECTRUM (Social, Psychological, Emotional, Concepts of self and Resilience: Understanding and Measurement) framework, whereby social and emotional competencies are seen as overlapping or connected with a wide range of other constructs, including mental health and wellbeing.

The UoS team’s role as evaluation partner involved two core elements: (a) providing expertise to support grantees with evaluating their own interventions; and (b) developing insights about the implementation and potential impacts of work to develop social and emotional skills across the FRF as a whole. This final report presents the overarching learning from that activity. Note that project-specific internal evaluations are reported elsewhere.

## Introduction

The Nesta Future Ready Fund (FRF) was designed to support selected organisations to take forward a range of different early-stage interventions to promote social and emotional skills through a variety of projects. Following the appointment of the University of Sussex as the fund’s evaluation partner, ten organisations were selected from a very large pool of applications as the FRF grantees. As shown in the table below, the grantees used a diverse range of approaches to reach a large number of young people across the country:

- *Developmental focus:* across the 11-18 age range, from projects aimed at the end of primary school and start of secondary school through to work with sixth-form students.
- *Target population:* aimed at young people who have been defined as ‘at-risk’, versus whole-school communities.
- *Agents of change:* involvement of specialist external practitioners, professional development of existing school staff, and training of peer mentors.
- *Delivery mechanisms:* ranging from audio tracks and books, through to drama and football.

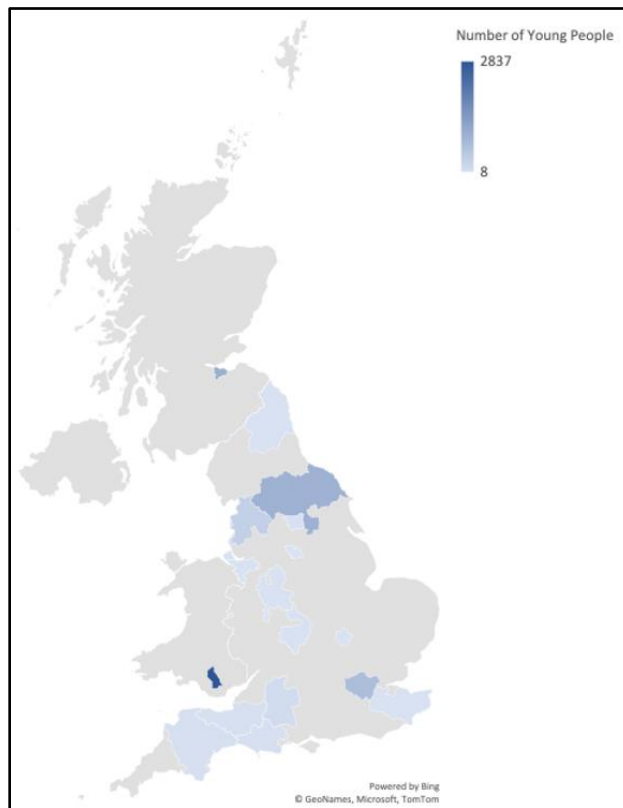
<b>Grantee</b>	<b>Summary of the project</b>	<b>Number of schools and young people reached</b>
<b>Children’s University Online</b>	The project was designed to build on the previous work of Children's University through developing CU Online, a digital platform that enables young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to record their participation in extra-curricular activities in and outside of school, to reflect on the skills being built through these activities, and to identify new activities for future development.	The project is ongoing until December 2020. The 18 participating secondary schools will engage 2086 students.
<b>EmpathyLab</b>	EmpathyLab’s project was a whole-school programme to build empathy in a cluster of schools (one secondary and seven feeder primary schools) in an area of high deprivation in Wales. The project sought to build the capacity of schools to develop young people’s empathy skills, literacy skills, and social activism, through engaging with books and stories in creative ways.	Work with the cluster of eight schools (including primary and secondary schools) reached 2837 students.
<b>Football Beyond Borders</b>	FBB works with local schools to inspire positive change in terms of behaviour and aspirations among groups of young people who are passionate about football but underachieving in education and displaying challenging behaviour. The FRF project expanded and tested the FBB model in a new region, namely Blackpool and the surrounding area. Both classroom sessions and football coaching sessions are intended to generate positive effects, with close attention to character, values, and social skills	Work with seven new schools in North West has so far reached 104 young people. The project runs until 2021.

<b>Grantee</b>	<b>Summary of the project</b>	<b>Number of schools and young people reached</b>
<b>Foundation for Positive Mental Health</b>	The 'Feeling Good with Positive Mental Training' (PosMT) project was designed to increase skills of resilience, improve self-perception, and grow intrinsic motivation among Year 7 pupils through a version of the NHS-accredited adult PosMT programme, adapted for a school environment. This involved multiple whole-class sessions of daily listening to short, relaxing audio tracks incorporating self-regulatory skills, along with a programme of teacher-led classroom activities delivered to whole classes of young people.	The programme reached 1233 pupils in six schools in England and Scotland.
<b>Franklin Scholars</b>	Franklin Scholars revolves around a peer mentoring approach designed to help young people who have been identified as vulnerable to develop social and emotional skills and increase their resilience. The intention for the FRF project was to run an RCT, working with seven new schools on the 'Beacon Programme'. The year-long programme, supported by a practitioner from Franklin Scholars as well as a school facilitator, involved Year 10 mentors organising weekly workshops with Year 7 mentees, using group activities, 1:1 academic tuition, and 1:1 coaching. These were supported by prepared materials divided into literacy and numeracy programmes of work.	210 students from seven schools in London, the North West, North East, West Midlands, Midlands were enrolled onto the mentoring programme.
<b>HeadStart</b>	The HeadStart project, led by Middlesbrough Council in partnership with MacMillan Academy, was based on a change process named the Academic Resilience Approach (ARA), aimed at school-wide systemic change to support sixth form students' mental health and wellbeing. A mix of universal and targeted interventions, led by teachers, practitioners and students, was expected to promote resilience skills in coping with challenges.	Six colleges in Middlesbrough partnered for the academic year and HeadStart activities reached 955 students.

<b>Grantee</b>	<b>Summary of the project</b>	<b>Number of schools and young people reached</b>
<b>Khulisa</b>	<p>'Face It Together' is designed to provide a restorative school culture and targeted work to develop social and emotional skills in young people with complex needs (often at risk of school exclusions and/or involvement in the criminal justice system). The project was intended to be taken forward in partner schools in London and Manchester, with small groups of young people working through a range of group activities and individual sessions over 6-8 weeks, based around experiential and creative activities run by qualified art and drama therapists. Running alongside this work is a programme of training for staff that draws upon Khulisa's approach and is intended to build a whole-school approach to social and emotional learning</p>	<p>13 secondary schools and PRUs in London Boroughs and the North West were involved, with project activities reaching 155 young people and 963 staff members.</p>
<b>Mind Moose</b>	<p>This is a digital, online, interactive programme designed to support the transition from primary to secondary schools. It involves a package of online activities with Year 6 students in the summer term prior to transition to their secondary schools, supported by school staff, with a further programme of activities after making the transition. The activities are designed to build students' skills in terms of resilience, self-awareness, and emotional competence, as well as teaching them effective coping skills for managing concerns, feelings, and other experiences relevant to the transition.</p>	<p>160 students took part from 4 primary schools based in the North West and South East of England in the summer term of 2019. The matched secondary schools did not follow up the delivery with the Year 7 pupils.</p>
<b>Sidmouth College</b>	<p>Building Resilient Learners is adapted from an existing course based in principles of cognitive-behavioural therapy, designed specifically for young people who are experiencing difficulties with wellbeing at school. The FRF project involved working with schools in the South West, screening Year 7 pupils for low wellbeing scores, and then providing a toolkit of strategies to promote social and emotional skills and thereby increase wellbeing via weekly sessions. Led by staff at Sidmouth College, the project involved specialist training of staff as well as use of a full pack of guidance and activity resources.</p>	<p>The intervention was carried out in 13 schools in Devon, Somerset, and Dorset. Overall, 409 students completed baseline measures, with 210 allocated to the intervention group.</p>

Grantee	Summary of the project	Number of schools and young people reached
<p><b>Voice 21</b></p>	<p>The 'Get Talking in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs)' project was intended to help PRU staff develop students' oral communication, teamwork, and listening skills, using a programme of professional development and whole-school approaches relating to both curriculum and pedagogy. The focus was on the relevance of oracy as a strategy to help students develop skills in expressing and managing or regulating their emotions, which was expected to support better interpersonal relationships and more responsible decision-making.</p>	<p>A total of 467 students from five PRUs in the South East and one PRU in the North East were involved in the project.</p>

The counties of the UK in which the FRF social and emotional skills development work was undertaken is shown on the map below, where darker shading represents greater reach of activity.



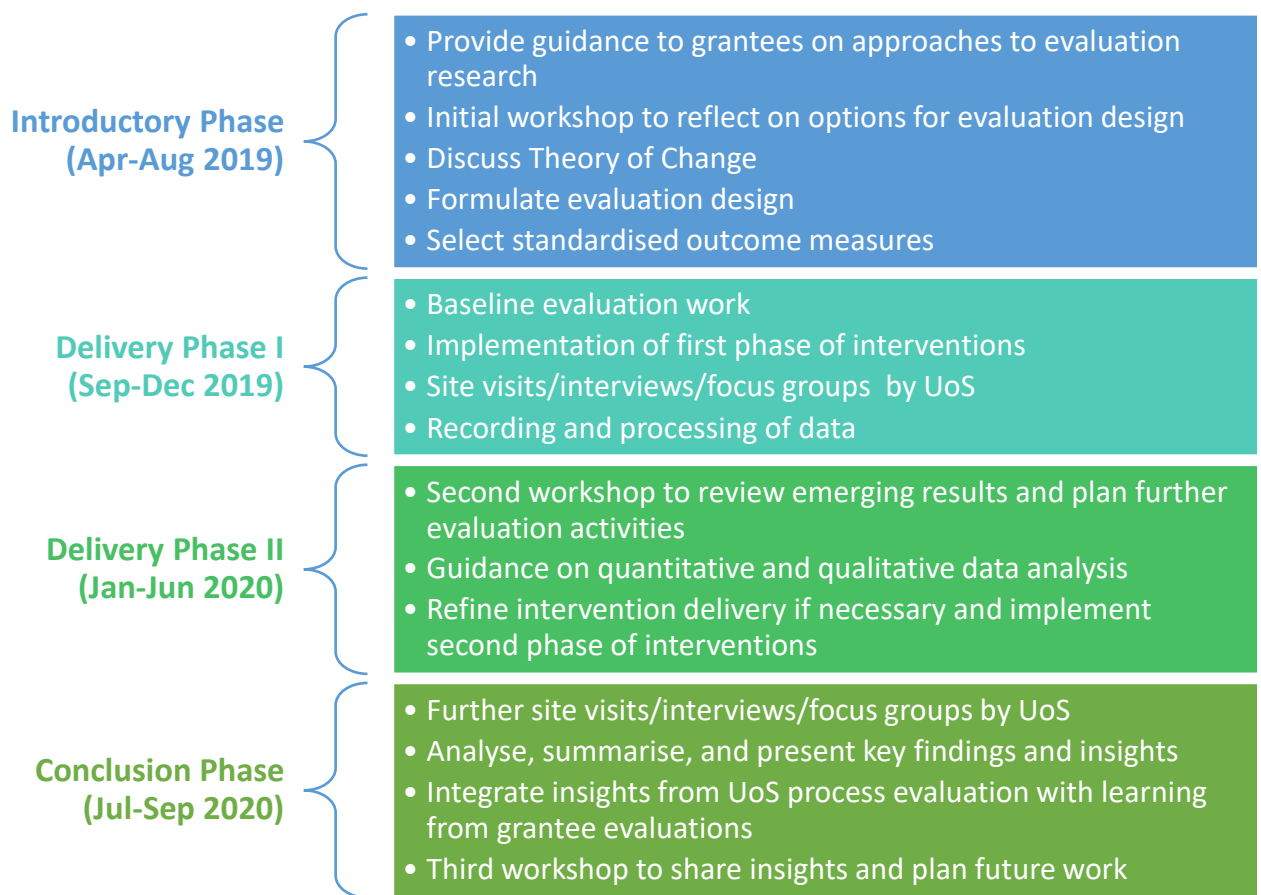
*Note. Areas shaded more heavily had higher levels of reach. This could be because a grantee was working with multiple schools in one area or because multiple grantees were working in the same area.*

## Summary of evaluation activity and support

Our evaluation of the Future Ready Fund was designed with three major sets of aims and objectives:

- to support grantees to establish realistic research designs and measurement approaches (especially incorporating standardised measurement tools) for enhancing their own evaluations;
- to provide grantees with support in implementing these evaluation designs, analysing the data, and interpreting and reporting on results; and
- to use mixed methods to gain insights regarding the FRF as a whole, and to provide recommendations regarding the delivery and support of work in this area.

In order to achieve the above objectives, the UoS evaluation activity was divided into four key phases. The broad plan for the UoS evaluation is shown in the graphic below:



The first phase of the UoS evaluation work was focused primarily on establishing positive relationships for working with the grantees. This process enabled us to understand the nature of each grantee’s intervention approach and support them in developing a realistic, logical, contextually sensitive and appropriate evaluation plan, incorporating standardised measures of the key outcome(s) relating to social and emotional skills.

We initially sought to identify the range of topics, theories, methods, and measures that would be pertinent to the work of the FRF grantees, using one-to-one contacts. Following an initial survey of the grantees, we proceeded to carry out much more detailed work with them, in person and remotely, to explore their theory of change and help each project to establish a practical and informative evaluation plan, including standardised measures of relevant social and emotional skills. We focused in particular on the SPECTRUM (Social, Psychological, Emotional, Concepts of self and Resilience: Understanding and Measurement) framework created in a review for the Education Endowment Foundation, where social and emotional competencies are seen as overlapping or connected with a wide range of other constructs, including mental health and wellbeing.

The specific choices of standardised measures, and the ways in which this part of the local evaluation was complemented by UoS site visits/interviews/focus groups, are shown in the table below. Nine of the ten grantees have reported use of a range of validated, standardised measures, some directly taken from the SPECTRUM database and others of a similar nature based on literature providing evidence of validation. Interestingly, nearly all grantees chose to use self-report measures, although Franklin Scholars and Voice 21 also included rating scales completed by teachers.

Grantee	Measures
Children’s University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bespoke Skills Builder measure (not a standardised instrument)</li> </ul>
EmpathyLab	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathy Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents: Affective Empathy, Cognitive Empathy, Prosocial Motivation, and Total score</li> </ul>
Football Beyond Borders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delaware Social and Emotional Competencies Scale</li> </ul>
Foundation for Positive Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (academic efficacy subscale)</li> <li>• Children’s Hope Scale</li> <li>• Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (fear of negative evaluation subscale)</li> <li>• Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale</li> <li>• Child Outcome Rating Scale</li> </ul>
Franklin Scholars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for Children: Child, Parent, and Teacher versions</li> </ul>



Grantee	Measures
HeadStart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale</li> <li>• Student Resilience Survey: Self-esteem, Problem-solving, and Peer Support, Total</li> </ul>
Khulisa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale</li> <li>• Emotion Regulation Questionnaire: Cognitive Reappraisal and Expressive Suppression</li> <li>• Children’s Coping Behaviour Questionnaire</li> <li>• Children’s Hope Scale</li> </ul>
Mind Moose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Resilience Survey: Family Connection, School Connection, Empathy, Self-esteem, Problem-solving, Peer Support, Goals and Aspirations, Total</li> </ul>
Sidmouth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale</li> <li>• Student Resilience Survey: Total score</li> <li>• Me and My School</li> <li>• Stirling Children’s Wellbeing Scale</li> </ul>
Voice 21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for Children</li> <li>• Child Behaviour Scale (teacher report): Aggressive with Peers, Prosocial with Peers</li> <li>• Bespoke measures of oracy</li> </ul>

We then worked with grantees throughout the FRF period as they began to carry out baseline and (where possible) follow-up data collection, before and after the implementation of the interventions. Although there was considerable consistency in terms of the overall approach to evaluation across the grantees (given that these were selected into the FRF as promising early-stage interventions), the precise formulation of the evaluation plan was highly variable across grantees. This relates to the fact that the projects were highly variable in terms of the nature and timing of the interventions being evaluated, as well as the stage of development of their work. It is also important to note that several grantees also worked to recruit control/comparisons groups of participants who did not receive the intervention but were set to complete both baseline and follow-up measures. However, in virtually all cases, the potential for follow-up data collection was also impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, as lockdown measures came into force in March 2020.

An additional workshop and numerous one-to-one remote contacts provided guidance to grantees on recording, processing, scoring, and analysing quantitative data from the standardised measures, as well as on conducting and analysing qualitative data. Arrangements were made for sharing data to enable secondary analysis of the quantitative data. In addition, a member of the UoS team (LR) also arranged site

visits or remote meetings to enable interviews/focus groups with young people and practitioners, where possible. Further guidance on analysis, writing up results, and planning of next steps was included at the final FRF workshop, and the UoS team also provided advice via email or telephone in response to specific queries over the course of the work.

## **Secondary analysis of quantitative data**

As well as advising grantees on streamlined and effective ways of recording and processing data from the standardised measures, the UoS team conducted a secondary analysis of these data. This was done in response to specific issues and queries raised through discussion with the grantees, but the common elements were:

- checking for internal consistency of participants' responses to the various scales that were administered;
- assessing the convergent validity of the scales in terms of their correlations with each other or with other data available to the grantees (e.g., from other measures used by the grantee and/or data available directly from schools);
- testing the statistical significance of changes over time, and where appropriate, analysing differences in the pattern of change across intervention and comparison groups;
- establishing the effect sizes of the changes over time; and
- exploring on a post-hoc basis potential factors that could be moderating effects of the interventions, such as demographic profile characteristics (e.g., gender).

## **Qualitative analysis of focus group and interview data**

An additional element of the Sussex team's planned process evaluation was a site visit by one of the team (LR) to each grantee. These visits incorporated focus groups/interviews with young people and staff members, in order to understand the practical implementation of the intervention in more detail. Scheduling difficulties/delays in coordinating with grantee staff and schools meant that not all site visits could happen as originally intended. In addition, our plans for a second site visit in all cases could not be realised due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the qualitative dataset gained from the site visits and remote interviews that took place proved to be invaluable for illuminating core aspects of intervention impact as well as underlying mechanisms likely to be driving observed changes.

A key goal of these activities was to discuss the perceived nature and impacts of the intervention activities with a variety of stakeholders including practitioners and young people. We were able to conduct site visits and/or conduct interviews or focus groups for 8 out of the 10 grantees, with 46 respondents providing qualitative data in total. The main areas of attention in interviews and focus group discussions related to:

- the subjective experiences of those involved in the interventions;
- the feelings and attitudes towards the interventions, including relationships with the practitioners and perceptions of the activities that are involved;
- changes experienced or observed as a result of engagement with the interventions;
- facilitators of success in the interventions; and
- barriers or obstacles to the effectiveness of the interventions.

## **Key findings and insights from evaluation analysis**

The majority of grantees had come into the FRF having already demonstrated some Level 2 evidence according to Nesta's Standards of Evidence; that is, they already had some evidence of positive change on outcome variables over the project intervention period. However, the rigorous use of standardised measures in assessing change was a significant step forward in creating a more robust Level 2 evidence base for the grantees. Nine of the ten grantees sought to use a pre-post design to track change in the selected measurable outcomes from baseline to one or more follow-ups following the implementation of the intervention.

Despite the extremely challenging circumstances faced over the project period, including those related to the Covid-19 pandemic, all grantees engaged in a large volume of activity, reaching thousands of young people through large-scale, whole-school interventions as well as targeted work with selected individuals who were identified as vulnerable or at-risk. This work included not only a substantial proportion of the planned project delivery, but also a great deal of data collection for evaluation purposes, involving thousands of scores in total, with data on standardised outcomes achieved at one time point for nine out of the ten grantees, and individually matched data at two or more time points achieved for seven projects. This enabled a valuable secondary analysis of results across the FRF.

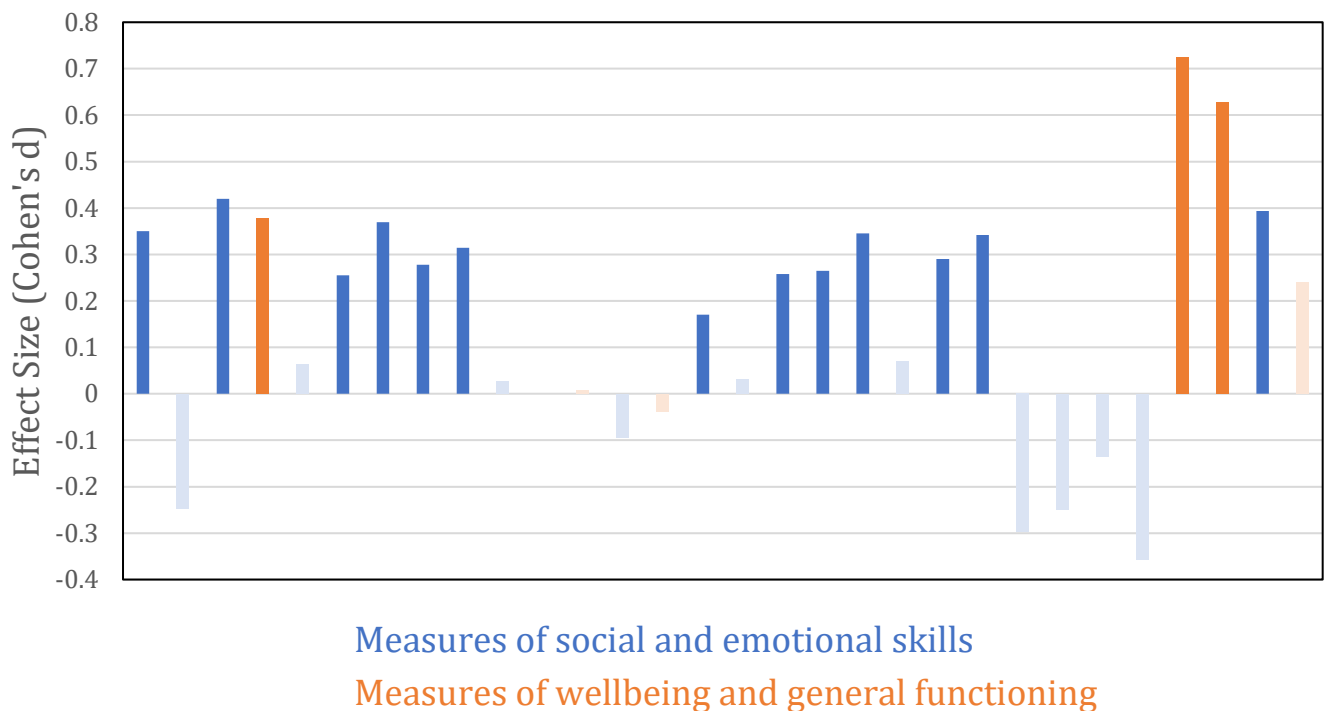
The results of our secondary analysis of quantitative data arising from the use of standardised measures showed that:

- Participants (both young people and staff where relevant) responded in reliable ways to the questions, with meaningful and consistent patterns of responding to questions designed to tap into the same underlying construct. Statistical tests revealed good levels of internal consistency on nearly all scales used (Cronbach's alpha averaged .79 and .81 at baseline and follow-up time points, respectively). This provides added reassurance that the standardised measures were completed in an appropriate and statistically reliable manner.
- There was good convergent validity in terms of how scores on the various standardised measures related to each other and/or to other measures available to the grantees and

shared with us. For example, measures of social and emotional skills correlated in theoretically expected ways with each other and with relevant aspects of well-being, and we found expected differences in terms of socioeconomic disadvantage, gender, and groups identified as role models vs. at-risk. This adds to our confidence in the appropriateness of the measures and how they were completed.

- There was an overall small effect of the early-stage interventions, with an average weighted effect size across seven grantees measuring social and emotional skills at two time points of Cohen's  $d = .17$ . Five of those seven grantees evidenced statistically significant pre-post comparisons of small to medium effect sizes, with positive improvements found for 16 out of 25 scores on standardised measures of social and emotional skills ( $p < .05$ ). Three out of five comparisons on indicators of broader wellbeing and psychological functioning were also found to be statistically significant, with medium to large effect sizes. These patterns are summarised in the graph below. Note that positive effect sizes indicate an improvement in scores from pre to post time points among those receiving the FRF interventions. All effect sizes are presented as Cohen's  $d$ , where  $d$  of .2 is commonly interpreted as a small effect size, .5 is medium, and .8 is large.

Pre-Post effect sizes in intervention groups



**Note.** Effects represented by bars with heavy shading were statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . Effects represented by bars with light shading were statistically non-significant.

Changes from pre- to post-intervention time points cannot be causally attributed to specific interventions. Unfortunately, there was insufficient data across grantees to arrive at a pooled estimate for the Future Ready Fund as a whole of how improvements in the intervention groups compared with those in comparison groups, as comparator data were only available for three grantees. However, we did find some promising indications of positive change that were specific to those who had been randomly allocated to receive an intervention. For example, in the case of one grantee, there were statistically significant improvements in resilience and well-being from baseline to follow-up in the intervention group but these were not found among those who had been randomly allocated to a control group.

In addition to the secondary analysis of quantitative data, we undertook a thematic analysis of the contributions from 46 young people and staff from eight different projects, who took part in focus groups and interviews carried out during site visits (or remotely in some cases where site visits could not be scheduled). Looking across the FRF as a whole, we identified three superordinate themes: **a) trust, self-belief, and agency; b) managing relationships; and c) facilitators of success.**

- First, a common thread running through the FRF projects was the importance of trust among and between young people and staff (both school staff and external project practitioners). This trust in turn appeared to generate an empowered sense of agency and confidence. In some cases, the focus was clearly on helping young people **learn to build trusting relationships** among themselves and with staff. In other cases, developing **young people's experience of being trusted** themselves was clearly a prominent aspect of the intervention itself. In turn, the experience of positive relationships was seen as a crucial foundation for **positive self-perceptions and confidence** among the young people.
- Second, a key theme was the way in which interventions provided young people with tools to help them manage their relationships. These included **skills in communication**, which enabled students to articulate their thoughts and feelings and experience a level of confidence in forming positive connections with others. In addition, a prominent aspect of the tools for managing relationships related to **self-regulation**, particularly in terms of handling difficult situations. This involved regulation of social behaviours with others as well as private thoughts and feelings.
- Third, the adults we interviewed, including both external project staff and school staff who had been trained, identified a focus on **sustainability and reinforcement** as one of the key facilitators of project success, whereby the key messages and learnings from the interventions are repeatedly emphasised and supported over time. Conversely, concerns about the durability of positive impacts were raised when there was a sense that key messages needed more reinforcement. A further consideration was the perceived need for a **systemic approach involving shared understanding and joint commitment** within

schools to the principles of the intervention. The most positive effects on building social and emotional skills were reported in contexts where there was a sense among staff of a joined-up process of planning and working together on the intervention. Thus, the potential for project impact was clearly seen as dependent on stable teamwork among different stakeholders.

Notwithstanding these positive accounts, there were a number of challenges that grantees had to overcome in completing the evaluation work. The two most obvious and prominent factors here were: a) difficulties arising in the context of the project delivery; and b) the time, effort, and expertise that needed to be devoted to evaluation activities in order to generate high quality datasets and robust analyses of the results.

Regarding the former, grantees' evaluation work was sometimes significantly hampered by issues with project delivery, such as the unexpected lack of engagement from schools in a given project, and of course the school closures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic that resulted in the suspension of the intervention (and, in many cases, the follow-up data collection). Regarding the latter, the allocation of sufficient time to evaluation was often described as challenging by grantees, most of whom had very small teams of project staff who all had multiple responsibilities, and did not have specific expertise in quantitative and qualitative evaluation techniques. In addition, challenges were encountered in the practical task of administering standardised measures, and the time and effort needed for the completion of questionnaires – especially if young people were perceived not to enjoy filling them out – were sometimes perceived as barriers. Similar problems were encountered in relation to procedures for gaining consent for each individual young person's participation (especially parent/carer consents), and this was particularly true for those projects which were working with university partners on randomised control-group designs with strict institutional governance requirements for ethical approval.

## **Conclusions and implications**

### **Supporting young people's social and emotional development**

The nature of the Future Ready Fund is such that the work undertaken was at a fairly preliminary stage, and so the positive changes observed cannot be causally attributed to specific intervention activities. Nonetheless, there was evidence across the fund of an overall small positive effect of the various grantees' projects in terms of improvements in scores on standardised measures. This is in line with evidence from control-group studies of more established programmes in the area of social and emotional learning, and suggests that the diverse early-stage interventions in the FRF may also be associated with improvements in social and emotional skills.

Statistically significant improvements were observed in five of the seven FRF projects where pre and post comparisons on standardised measures were possible. These were evident across a wide range of competencies, from different aspects of hope and resilience (including problem-solving and peer support) through to dimensions of empathy and emotion regulation skills such as cognitive reappraisal. These improvements were found to be small to medium sized effects, with some evidence from some grantees of significant (and sometimes larger size) effects on standardised measures of wellbeing. Overall, these patterns correspond to different areas of skills within established conceptualisations of social and emotional learning, such as self-awareness, social awareness, motivation, relationship skills, and self-regulation.

Moreover, these quantitative findings were triangulated by reports from young people and staff in our qualitative analysis, underlining the importance of a relational approach as a common foundation for the benefits in terms of young people's social and emotional skills. The experience of trust, both in terms of trusting relationships with peers and adults *and* in terms of young people feeling trusted by others, was engendered across a range of grantees, and this appeared to go hand in hand with a sense of agency and accompanying positive self-perceptions. In addition, our overarching analysis pointed to the importance of communication skills and self-regulatory techniques for managing the demands of relationships in the context of challenging situations in everyday life. The emphasis on dialogue and communication for fostering positive youth development is a core principle of dialogic techniques in pedagogy, and self-regulation – both in terms of managing behaviour in social situations and in terms of managing one's cognitive and emotional states – is seen as one of the core foundations for successful development from early childhood onwards. Our analysis suggests that these continue to be key issues for young people who participated in the evaluation research, and that these participants welcomed support from the projects in relation to these challenges.

Given the early stage of many grantees' work and the constraints on the evaluation data, it is inevitable that questions remain about the wider impact of social and emotional skills on broader aspects of lifetime development, including medium term benefits to academic performance and/or longer term benefits to employability, productivity in the workplace, and more general health and wellbeing in work and community settings. However, Nesta's report on the future of employment in 2030 suggests that interpersonal skills of the kind fostered through the FRF projects are likely to be in increasing demand over the coming years, and so the developments in social and emotional competencies observed in the present work may be relevant to broader outcomes for future success.

### **Implications for practice and policy**

The overall evaluation of the FRF projects implies that investment in early-stage interventions is likely to have value for fostering positive changes in young people's social and emotional skills, and potentially their broader wellbeing and psychological functioning. Although the evaluation of early-stage

interventions reported here – mainly occurring at Level 2 of Nesta’s standards of evidence – was not sufficient for making definitive causal attributions of observed positive changes to specific interventions, there were preliminary indications of positive effects that were specific to participants who had experienced interventions (i.e., not found in participants in control/comparison groups).

Moreover, the successful development and implementation of evaluation plans, incorporating the use of standardised measures alongside qualitative analysis of interview data from young people and staff, shows that reliable and valid evaluation data can be collected by even small project teams given sufficient guidance and support. Nonetheless, the experience of supporting the FRF as evaluation partner leads us to make a number of important recommendations to promote good practice and enhance the value of future work in this area.

### **Recommendations for grantees**

1. Maintain and where necessary strengthen the emerging indicators of good practice in social and emotional skills development from the FRF evaluation, particularly in terms of strategies to foster young people’s agency and self-belief through the development of trusting relationships, and to promote effective relationship skills in communication and self-regulation of behaviour, cognition, and emotion. Benefits are expected to be greatest when taking a systemic and coordinated approach to working with all stakeholders, and reinforcing young people’s skills development through regular practice.
2. Invest additional resources specifically to support evaluation research, and to ensure an evidence-based approach to developing intervention approaches. This can involve appointment of dedicated impact/evaluation officers, and/or partnering with external research organisations with relevant expertise, for example to conduct independent evaluations or to provide training and support for project staff. Experts on the relevant research literature should be consulted to support the development of robust and specific theories of change by identifying appropriate theoretical frameworks and constructs relating to the specific short-term and long-term outcomes that are expected to be positively influenced by their interventions.
3. Allocate additional time for designing and carrying out the evaluation work, allowing for: a) formulating more sophisticated and comprehensive approaches in terms of research design (e.g., establishing appropriate comparison groups, including random allocation to intervention and control conditions where appropriate); b) working systemically with all stakeholders to ensure commitment to the evaluation work and protocols; c) drawing upon multiple informants (i.e., beyond self-reports by young people) in order to enable triangulation of findings; d) designing and carrying out rigorous qualitative work to illuminate impacts and mechanisms of change in depth and refine theories of change; and e) recording, processing, analysing, and writing up the data from the evaluation work.



4. Create processes and mechanisms for working with external evaluation researchers who are commissioned to carry out quantitative and qualitative evaluation work independently. This requires clear and detailed work with partner organisations (e.g., schools) that are being recruited, well in advance, in order to set expectations regarding evaluation arrangements. Guidance on evaluation activities can be integrated into staff training and other professional development activities, as well as into the timetable of core project activities with young people, to ensure that the intervention work is fully embedded in an evaluation research culture.

## Recommendations for Nesta

1. In order to learn more about ‘what works?’ in this space, consider the implications of having a very diverse range of interventions (as in the current FRF) versus a more focused and narrowly specified group of interventions that would be selected to align to a common pre-defined set of outcomes. The former is helpful for an exploration of promising early-stage programmes such as those in the FRF portfolio. However, the latter may be optimally suited to a subsequent phase of evaluating specific types or groupings of interventions, where more direct comparisons of interventions with equivalent outcome objectives can be made using a more tightly-defined common outcomes framework.
2. Ensure that grantees are sufficiently well-resourced – particularly in terms of time, technological needs, and expertise – to take forward the necessary evaluation activities. This goes hand in hand with the need for increased clarity to distinguish the responsibility of the grantees to (a) deliver the intervention, and (b) ensure robust evaluation of the intervention, either by carrying out their own evaluation work or by working with external research partners. It is recommended that a discrete portion of allocated funding is designated for evaluation within grantees’ awards. This practice would also help to clarify that the Nesta evaluation partner has a distinct overarching role, rather than providing evaluation for individual projects.
3. Separate the goals of (a) providing evaluation guidance and support to grantees and (b) gaining insights into the implementation and effectiveness of grantees’ interventions. Although the two goals can be simultaneously achieved within a single programme of evaluation activity, as in the present work, these are distinct strands and conflating them can pose challenges and lead to confusion (e.g., role confusion for grantees).
4. Consider investing in longer timeframes of project delivery and evaluation research in order to assess the impacts of interventions on a more diverse set of both short-term and longer-term outcomes. This would allow for an assessment of the mechanisms that drive positive change in a broad set of project outcomes over time, enabling for example an assessment of how gains in specific social and emotional skills may be predictive of later improvements in performance on

key academic qualifications and/or other indicators of wider functioning. This strategy could also protect a programme such as FRF from the effects of disruption associated with unforeseen events (such as the pandemic implications), by allowing a longer-term view, and would provide valuable insight into the relative acceptability and sustainability of different interventions.